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SECA Award Winners

By Kenneth Baker

SECA award winners: Each installment of SFMOMA's biennial SECA awards to uncelebrated Bay Area artists makes the honor's value harder to estimate.

At this point in the series' history, the selection of an artist such as Kota Ezawa -- who already has a national, even international, exhibition record -- does more for SECA than it does for him.

Named for a museum auxiliary group, the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, the SECA award confers a modest cash prize and a place in a group exhibition at the museum and its catalog.

Forget trying to discover a pattern in SECA's choices. The long jurying process, which involves multiple studio visits to nominated artists, seems to seek a certain level of intensity that might manifest itself in any number of ways.

Ezawa has made his name using computer animation to simplify images lifted from the common culture, such as the supposed home movie of Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee's wedding and honeymoon that circulated on the Internet. Ezawa has made it into a two-channel video, perhaps with reference to early stereopticon pictures of the Western landscape in which the lurid memento plays out.

Characteristic of his work with video, Ezawa has left the soundtrack intact, its tone and detail in this case causing us to seek relief in the inaccuracy of the images.

Leslie Shows stands out among the SECA award winners with paintings I find much easier to admire than to like. They grow out of moments implicit in every painter's process that most paintings ask us to leave out of account: the moments -- or hours, days -- of scrutiny that come between one decision or spell of execution and another.

"Two Ways to Organize" (2006) may have begun with slurries of acrylic wash in which Shows then saw landscape inklings that she then half exaggerated and half obliterated by the addition of collage and other media.

This sort of stop-and-start improvisation frequently goes off the rails but Shows has a surer instinct for it than Sarah Cain, another SECA winner of dreamy unpredictability.

Amy Franceschini gets credit for some ingenious found-object sculpture expressing a unique blend of humor and activism. But among the five, Mitzi Pederson stirs expectations most intriguingly. Her floor piece in broken cinder block and glitter "Untitled (ten years later or maybe just one)" (2005) cuts a most peculiar middle path between process and artifice, optimism and desolation. nd old films in "Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey?"